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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 001576

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SUBJECT: JORDAN'S LOWER HOUSE APPROVES ASSOCIATIONS LAW
AMENDMENTS

REF: A. AMMAN 1054

[B. AMMAN 942](#)

[C. AMMAN 450](#)

[D. AMMAN 343](#)

[E. 08 AMMAN 3386](#)

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Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1. \(SBU\)](#) Jordan's Lower House of parliament approved amendments to the controversial Law on Associations on July [12. MPs](#) voted to retain the requirement that foreign-origin funding for NGOs operating in Jordan be approved by the full cabinet, rejecting a government proposal which would have designated the Minister of Social Development to perform this role. We expect, however, that the forthcoming regulations will help to streamline this process. Another significant amendment added on the floor of parliament narrowed the definition of non-Muslim religious NGOs allowed to operate in Jordan to only Christian organizations. The royally-appointed Senate is next in line to consider the amendments. End Summary.

Amendments Come To The Floor

[2. \(C\)](#) In an evening session on July 12, the Lower House of parliament debated and approved amendments to Jordan's Law on Associations. The law, originally passed in July 2008, greatly increased the regulatory burden on civil society organizations and has been the source of significant international criticism. Following instructions from the King in August 2008, Jordan's government vowed to amend the law in line with suggestions from NGOs in order to ease or eliminate many of the new restrictions. Throughout the process of drafting the amendments, tribal conservative MPs told us that they were against expanded freedoms for civil society, which could allow expanded Islamist and foreign influence in Jordanian politics. When the amendments came to the floor for a vote, MPs acted on those concerns by rejecting or offering further changes to the government's suggestions.

Foreign Funding for Jordanian NGOs

[3. \(U\)](#) The chief topic of debate was foreign funding for Jordanian NGOs. Article Seventeen of the 2008 law required all foreign funding to be approved by the full cabinet. The amended law presented by the government allowed the "competent minister," which will usually be the Minister of Social Development, to approve foreign funding instead of the cabinet. Offering an amendment of his own, Lower House Speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali suggested that the parliament

reject the government's changes and retain provisions requiring full cabinet approval. Majali's change was pushed through very quickly by unanimous consent, without a formal vote. Mamdouh Abbadi, a former Amman mayor turned MP, later offered an amendment to allow the newly-created Registrar of Societies (Ref C) to approve foreign funding rather than the Minister or full cabinet, but the amendment was defeated in a very close vote.

¶4. (C) Comment: The return to full cabinet approval for foreign funding is a step backward, but it is not the final word. It is likely that the as yet unwritten regulations for the law will ease the procedures for full cabinet approval for foreign funding. Minister of Social Development Hala Lattouf has previously proposed creating a list of "pre-cleared" organizations which would be given blanket approval by the cabinet to accept foreign funding under a certain amount. End Comment.

Foreign Funding for Regional NGOs Based in Jordan -----

¶5. (SBU) Another contentious debate on foreign funding centered around Article Nine of the law, which clarified the legal position of regional organizations which are based in Jordan but do not operate in-country. (Note: Many American NGOs base their Iraq operations out of Amman, but do not conduct domestic programs in Jordan. End Note.) The 2008 law requires such organizations to obtain full cabinet approval for foreign funding and prohibits them from soliciting funds within Jordan. The amendment offered by the government allowed ministerial approval for foreign funding rather than full cabinet approval, and deleted the prohibition on soliciting funds within Jordan. Several MPs expressed concern about western interference in regional

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politics and argued that allowing regional offices of foreign civil society organizations to operate in Amman is tantamount to approval of their regional political agendas. Other MPs responded that most such NGOs were involved in charity work in Gaza and Iraq, adding that creating onerous funding requirements would dampen their ability to address the humanitarian crises in both places.

¶6. (C) Comment: During the debate in parliament, the government was given several opportunities to defend the amendments. Minister of Justice Ayman Odeh and Minister of Social Development Hala Lattouf did a noticeably poor job of explaining the rationale behind easing foreign funding restrictions for regional NGOs. Neither spoke about the positive role of regional NGOs based in Jordan, allowing MPs to imagine for themselves a nefarious agenda behind their operations. While the ministers offered technical explanations of the law, they failed to address the assumptions behind the concerns of MPs. End Comment.

¶7. (U) Following a confusing flurry of suggested amendments, Majali proposed that foreign-origin funding for branches of foreign NGOs be subject to approval by the full cabinet -- also a return to the original text. Majali's amendment again passed unanimously. It was then suggested that the entire amendment dealing with regional branches of NGOs not operating in Jordan be scrapped and the original text of Article Nine be used. Majali asked MPs to stand up if they agreed with the amendment. The vote turned chaotic as several MPs stood up and then sat down when urged to do so by their peers. Others who were seated at the beginning of the vote stood up near the end, making their votes unclear. After much shouting and confusion, Majali called for a vote using the USAID-provided electronic voting system. MPs then voted 42-32 to return to the original text for all of Article Nine. (Note: Many MPs were caught off guard by the use of electronic voting, which requires them to use a small smart card. MPs protested that they forgot their cards at home, and were therefore unable to vote. End Note.)

Religious Organizations

18. (U) Another intensely debated amendment concerned Article Twenty-Nine, which outlines restrictions on non-Muslim religious NGOs in Jordan. The amended article as submitted by the government to parliament allows non-Muslim religious organizations to provide "social and charitable services" as long as those services are not part of a proselytizing campaign. During the debate, MP Mamdouh Abbadi warned that the article as written would allow "Jews, Buddhists, and Baha'is" to establish religious charities in Jordan. He proposed an amendment that would only permit Christian organizations to form non-Muslim religious charities. IAF deputy Suleiman Sa'ad, warning deputies of the potentially nefarious influence of foreign religious charities, proposed a further amendment which would only allow non-Muslim religious organizations to operate in Jordan if their members were Jordanian. Abbadi countered that non-Jordanian religious organizations have set up hospitals and other service-oriented programs which provide valuable services to the Jordanian public at no cost to the government. In the end, Abbadi's amendment carried the day and Sa'ad's amendment was defeated -- only Christians will be allowed to establish non-Muslim religious organizations, but there will be no requirement that they be of Jordanian nationality.

Registrar of Societies

19. (U) There was a short debate on the amendment to Article Four, which outlines the membership and powers of a Registrar of Societies. The 2008 law had no provision for a Registrar, and left the Minister of Social Development to develop a mechanism for NGO registration and oversight without civil society input. The Registrar's role as envisioned in the amendment is to coordinate registration and oversight of civil society from within the Ministry of Social Development.

MPs suggested several additions to the membership of the registrar's eight member board, including the Minister of Awqaf, who oversees Muslim religious charities, and Minister of Health. None of these changes were adopted in the end, but the Lower House did accept the Legal Committee's recommendation that another civil society representative be added to the board, creating a possible 5-4 split vote on the board in favor of the government rather than the suggested 5-3 split.

Press and NGO Reaction

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110. (C) Initial reaction from NGOs has been negative, but muted. None of the NGO coalition which helped to forge the amendments were present for the debate, a reflection of civil society's lack of follow-through when it came to lobbying for their own interests. Since the session was held in the evening close to filing deadlines, press stories were factual and did not cover the entirety of the law's passage. We expect that further reaction will filter into newspaper opinion pages in the coming days as pundits digest the Lower House's actions and as civil society considers its strategy for the law's consideration in the Senate.

Comment: The Road Ahead

111. (C) Once the Lower House publishes its official amended version of the law, it will be presented to the royally-appointed Senate. The Senate is usually reluctant to alter laws that come to it from the Lower House, but it has done so in the past when media reaction or strong government intervention prompts a change in course. Many of our civil society interlocutors seem to be hoping that the Senate will

act in their favor, but fear that any public statement asking the Senate to do so could create a backlash. On the government side, several ministers invested quite a bit of political capital in the run-up to the extraordinary session to convince MPs to pass the amendments without further changes. Following the mixed result of the July 12 session, it is unclear whether the government is willing to use further capital to press the Senate, especially when a crowded schedule of controversial legislation remains on parliament's agenda. Looking forward, post will engage with government interlocutors and civil society activists on next steps and potential ways to undo or mute the impact of the Lower House's actions.

Beecroft